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# RITUAL ACTIVITIES

771 Few, if any, Washo activities do not contain an element which we can describe as religious, supernatural, or magical. This element is most commonly revealed by specifically ritualized behavior carried on while a regular course of action is being taken by a Washo. The following sections will deal with this ritualized behavior and the rationale for it offered by the Washo.

## CONCEPTION AND CONTRACEPTION

842 Apparently the Washo have no specific ritual to encourage conception. They are extremely fond of children and desire as many as possible. No Washo has [847] ever heard of, or will admit having heard of, infanti- [848] cide among the Washo, although they have heard of the practice among other Indians. The birth of an illegitimate child, despite the attitude of whites, is greeted with as much joy as that of a legitimate child.

842 However, it is believed that conception can be pre-
789 vented by manipulation of the afterbirth. When the afterbirth is expelled it is wrapped in a piece of deer hide or cloth and buried. It is always placed right side up if a woman desires to continue bearing children. If she wishes not to have children it is buried upside down. If at a later time she wishes to become preg- [178] nant, she will turn the earth where the upside-down afterbirth was buried. Informants say that not many people do this any more, mainly because younger women go to the hospital to have their babies, but that many people know how and some may still do it.

842 Certain Indians are reported to be able to prevent
754 the birth of children without the knowledge of the woman concerned. This requires the cooperation of a woman who has just had a child and who will give the magician the afterbirth. It is then buried or hidden upside down and the woman concerned will not become pregnant. The method of transferring the influence of the afterbirth from the real mother to the victim was not explained, and in fact the practice was revealed with a good deal of reluctance.

## BIRTH
(2178-2293)

844 Informants report that the baby was not touched, either by the mother or her attendants, until the afterbirth was expelled. The birth and recuperation were [845] carried out in a pit filled with warm ashes. A slow birth was blamed on the belief that the mother had [843] slept too much or been lazy during her pregnancy.

The mother was not allowed to eat salt until the [263] baby's umbilicus dropped off, usually in two or three days. The umbilicus was dried and hung on the right [856] side of the cradleboard to insure that the baby would be right-handed.

846 The baby's hair was cut about thirty days after its birth. Until that time the mother was not permitted to [262] eat meat or to leave her bed of ashes. However, one [302] of my informants who had borne eight children claimed never to have spent more than two weeks in her lying- [178] in bed. She did insist that "in the old days" women adhered to the traditional thirty-day period.

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881 [271] [262] [263] active and not to be lazy. She drinks only warm water. In the old days anything that she gathered anyone could come along and take. She couldn't eat meat or salt but Washo don't think eggs are the same as meat."

[124] [262] (This last statement was in response to direct questions and does not reflect special Washo traits. In fact, all food appears to have been forbidden for four days.)

[574] [202] The family of the girl immediately prepares as much food as possible to feed the guests. One informant remembers in his youth that a family of a girl eligible for a dance would light a large fire part way up on Job's Peak to announce the event.

[778] The dance itself is carried out at night. Singing and hand-clapping accompany the dancing, which may go on all night. During the dance the girl carries a wand about six or seven feet long. The wand is made of a very light wood, often elderberry, and painted red with a native pigment.

[178] In the past, groups camped about Dresslerville staged their dances at the base of a prominent hill nearby. During the night the girl was required to run to the top of the hill and light four fires; this practice has been discontinued for many years, however, apparently as a result of white accusations that the Indians started range fires and also to avoid attracting curious whites.

About dawn one of the girl's male relatives ran forward and snatched the stick from her. He then ran with it into the hills and hid it in an upright position in some out-of-the-way place.

[856] [824] The elderberry wand is a device used to insure the girl's continued agility and lightness of foot. As long as the hidden stick remains unbroken the girl will remain straight and agile.

[824] After the stick was taken away, an older female relative took a small amount of ash on a whisk of sage, and dusted the nude girl on the head, arms, and legs. This ritual was accompanied by an informal prayer that the girl not suffer pains in her head, arms, or legs. She was told: "I am doing this early in the morning so that you will get up early in the morning and work hard." The whisk was then thrown into the crowd, along with a gift, which today is usually a bit of money. Food or beads were apparently used in the past.

[782] [431] [178] [515] After the dusting, a basketful of water was brought forward and the girl was bathed. The basket was then thrown into the crowd. This was considered a high point of the celebration. After she was bathed, a few dabs of native pigment were placed on her chest and face.

[302] The ceremony above was described as the "real way to do it . . . the way they did it in the old days."

881 178 The Carson Valley Record Courier reports a puberty dance held in the summer of 1919 in which at least some of these activities were observed (although the reporter thought he was attending a betrothal dance). Some two-hundred Indians were in attendance. There were no fires, only lanterns and flashlights. The participants had taken up a collection and purchased watermelon, ice cream, cake, pie, bread, and meat for the feast. The food was served (to the surprise of the reporter) on a long table with plates. About midnight two girls appeared in the center of the dancing circle carrying long wands.

[574] In 1926 Lowie witnessed a girls' dance near Minden

Sagebrush bark was used for several things in addition to the sock and leggings. Rolled and sewed loose it served as a mattress. It was plaited into a mat and was also used as a diaper, baby pad, and women's napkin.

Snowshoes (shumelli) were made round with a slight tail of manzanita or other wood with buckskin, deer sinew, or bark for webbing. A piece of wood about 5 feet long was bent round when it was green, the ends tied and cut or burned, and was put between two flat rocks to dry. The final diameter of the loop was from 14 to 18 inches. Usually a buckskin strip three or four inches wide was twisted until it was about an inch wide and this was then plaited vertically and horizontally across the circle of wood forming an open network. The foot was lashed to the middle of the netting and a pole several feet long was used to aid in support while walking.

A willow basketry cradle (bikus) was made in triangular outline with a heavy willow across the top and along the edges and twined vertical rods. A horizontal reinforcing rod ran across the back, 12 inches from the top of a large cradle, where the hood and the carrying strap attached. The hood or sun shade (ma?yodop) was twined with pendants of shell or beads suspended from the front "to prevent the child from becoming cross-eyed." The ma?yodop carrys a design of parallel diagonal lines for a boy and a continuous zigzag or diamond chain design for girls. A temporary baby basket was also made for a newborn child with an oval back, woven sides at the head end, and no hood.

A sagebrush bark pad was put down and the infant, wrapped in a small rabbit skin robe, was placed over this and lashed to the cradle with buckskin. A buckskin strap was attached to the back of the cradle and passed over the forehead of the woman who carried it.

Cradles were made in a variety of sizes and a child was put in a larger cradle when it outgrew the one it was using at the time. A child may have as many as five cradles. One large cradle from the Genoa Museum measured 11" wide at the top, 3 1/2" at the bottom, and 32" long. It had 11 weft and 38 warp elements at the center. Plate V, D illustrates a basketry cradle.

Headwear consisted of a knotted hair net (megodih¢p) of twine worn only by the men, headbands (ih¢pbey¢gul) of deer skin or a fur piece, and feathers (tsisuapo). There was considerable individual variation in hair dressing and there was no one style for men or for women. The front and at times the sides were cut to form bangs. It was worn long, past the shoulders, possibly parted in the middle. It was also made into one or two braids, the braid held by sagebrush strands. If one braid, it fell behind and if two they usually fell in front over the shoulders. Another way was to tie the hair in a knot at the back of the head.

881 (777) (224) and did not comb her hair. Lowie (1939, 306) says she lay on warm ashes contained in a pit. The girl was not secluded, but men could not touch her clothes or approach her before the puberty dance, for this would cause them bad luck in hunting.

(535) (574) On the fourth night of the menses, the girl's parents invited their friends and relatives to a dance to be given for the girl. The mother or another female relative, such as a grandmother or a great aunt, was the sponsor of the dance. The girl opened the ceremony by climbing to the top of a mountain accompanied by a relative or friend who was a girl and a male non-(787) relative. The girl carried live coals and a long light pole painted red. With the coals the girl lit four fires on top of the mountain. If the smoke from the fires rose straight into the air, it was thought a good omen and the girl would 881 live a long life. If the smoke hugged the ground, the omen was bad. The char-778 acteristics of the pole the girl carried and its fate after the puberty dance (856) were thought to have an effect upon the girl. The lightness of the pole made the girl lively. After the dance the girl's father carried the pole high into the mountains and placed it where it would remain upright and not be destroyed by fire. This placing of the pole helped the girl's legs remain strong when (824) climbing mountains in later life. Both Holbrook and Curtis (1926, 96) say the girl's pole was of elder and Cartwright (1955, 137) says it was of tamarack.

881 (526) After the girl had finished lighting the four fires, she raced the non-relative back to the foot of the mountain. If she stumbled and showed signs of losing, her relative snatched the pole from her hands and won the race for her. The girl had to win, either herself or by proxy, because if she did not, everything she had built for her future during her four days of fasting would be lost.

881 535 (778) After the race the dancing began. The girl planted her pole in the ground and danced near it. The dance was a sort of shuffling step, the left foot being slightly raised and moved and the right foot dragged along. An attendant danced with the girl. The attendant was a young female relative who was provided with a pole similar to the girl's except that it was unpainted. The attendant also planted her pole in the ground and the two girls danced between them. The duty of the attendant was to support the girl if she showed (533) signs of weakness. The girl's sponsor stood behind the girl as she danced; the attendant's mother stood behind the attendant. Men and women sang songs composed of meaningless words during the dancing. After a time other women joined in the dance and formed a circle. Then the men joined the dance clustering together in one part of the circle (Lowie, 1939, 308). The dancing continued until dawn.